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## **Blended: Writers on the Stepfamily Experience**

Samantha Waltz, ed.  
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In *Blended: Writers on the Stepfamily Experience*, Samantha Waltz brings together over thirty writers to speak on their experiences inhabiting blended families. The constituent pieces are brief, autobiographical reflections, ranging from three to twelve pages. The brevity of the pieces does not allow for sustained analytical development of any one writer's experiences but does result in a relatively expansive collection of familial snapshots that, cumulatively, provide a kaleidoscopic portrait of the blended family. Greater cross-cultural diversity would be welcome (only two of the stories explicitly deal with the ways in which cultural differences may present unique challenges for stepfamilies), as would a greater representation of non-white authors. However, the range of experiences and perspectives represented here is otherwise broad. A primary strength of the collection is that the reflections of biological parents are intermixed with the reflections of stepparents and the reflections of adult children to yield colorful, multidimensional patterns that do not allow one perspective to dominate the others.

Some common themes that run through the essays in *Blended* include the problem of naming, holiday stresses, struggles over different parenting styles, and relations with exes. The language of "stepfamilies" ("stepmothers," "stepchildren," "half siblings") troubles several contributors who comment on how such terms connote a less than "real" familial relationship. Part of the lived reality of many members of stepfamilies is not knowing what to call one another. Mother's day is a particularly vexed holiday for stepchildren and stepmothers for this reason, as contributor Melissa Hart poignantly observes in her recollection of the annual struggle inscribing Mother's Day (or is it Mothers' Day?) cards ("Tales of a Confused Apostrophe"). Other holidays also include struggles over kinship boundaries, as sacred family traditions and

rituals need to be modified to include new family members. Family vacations become stressful as different parenting styles conflict. Dreams of a fairy-tale life crumble—although optimism prevails—on Rebecca Payne’s “Stepfamily Honeymoon.” In “I Love You More,” Kerry Cohen courageously speaks of loving her “own” child more than her partner’s, as she negotiates for time alone with her son that excludes her stepdaughter. The child’s perspective on such exclusions is embodied in Sallie Brown’s “Epiphany” that her father’s second wife never wanted to be a mother.

Children in blended families may struggle with being wanted “too much” as well as “too little.” At the same time as stepparents may disappoint the child’s expectations, divorced parents may compete for their affection. As Nancy Atoniotti’s “Nightshade Love” and Gigi Rosenberg’s moving tale of her “Secret Father” reveal, children of divorce are sometimes asked to lead segregated lives as they travel affectively, as well as physically, between two homes and two identities. In her tragi-comic essay, “It Takes a Villa,” Barbara Lodge recounts her failed attempt to create an extended family for her children including all their parents. As Lodge, her ex-husband, and their current partners celebrate her son’s graduation and daughter’s birthday (and Father’s day) together in Italy, Lodge remembers why she got divorced. As we witness an alcoholic ex-husband take their children binge-drinking, we are reminded that the “happily-ever-after-post-divorce-family” ideal may blind us to reality. The most compelling essays in the collection reveal, rather than obscure, the messy realities and emotional landscapes of stepfamilies and engage in critical self-reflection concerning the authors’ own expectations and struggles.

The collection of essays is divided into five parts: “Coming Together,” “Self-discovery,” “Evolution,” “Acceptance,” and “Reflections.” I have mixed feelings about this organization. The narrative arc upon which the collection is premised suggests a “natural progression” of stages that members of blended families go through (xvi). I am skeptical that such a common “journey” exists. As the characters in these stories attest—a young boy with autism, a morbidly obese adult son, cheating lovers, bitter, amiable, alcoholic, and bipolar ex-spouses, a young father with a prison record, an aging father with dementia and an aging stepmother who refuses to care for him and many others—different family members face unique challenges in, and pose different challenges for, the stepfamilies they inhabit as their different journeys unfold. Indeed, it is the diversity of these stories and perspectives that provide the strength of the collection. Like the members of stepfamilies themselves, the narratives comprising *Blended* contest the principles of inclusion and exclusion that seek to label, organize, and affiliate them according to preconceived ideals. And that, perhaps, is how it should be.